SAINTS, SINNERS AND THE GATES OH HELL Matthew 16: 13--23 November 8, 1964

The Church

We are four Sundays away from the most important day in the long history of our church. Much has already been said about the Building program: much more will be said. What every member of this congregation needs to realize between now and Dec. 6 is that what we do on that Sunday will determine the future of this church for years to come. We have reached a plateau: and in four weeks we will decide whether we will continue alon the road we have been traveling during the past 18 months - or whether we should retreat

As we approach that decision, I think it might be well to give some serious thought to the church itself. As we approach the decision regarding this particular church in which we find ourselves, I think it might be well to look into the meanong and mission of the whole church, from New Testament days to the present. And so I have chosenn for my text this morning that well known passage from the 16th ch. of Matthew. In my mind it is one of the most important passages in the entire Bible.

Jesus turned to his disciples and asked: ("Who do men say that I am.") They reported that some thought he was John the Baptist: others thought he was Elijah or one of the prophets. And then he turned the question to them: ("But who do you say that Iam?") It was Peter who replied: ("You are the Christ, the son of the living God.") We must remember that Peter's statment here was by no means a matter of common knowledge. Men simply didn't know who he was, as the verses before illustrate. Some thought he was a prophet: - there were plenty of itenerate prophets in thos e days. Other followed him because he was a great teacher: other obviously wanted to be near him because they had heard thet he healed the sick and made the lame walk and the blind see. Even the disciples, the chosen twelve, were not certain who he was. And so this brief exchange between Jesus and Peter is not just a question and answer perioid: it is not a recital of alesson Jesus had taught. It goes far beyong these to the area of faith. ("Who do you say that I am?") in this regard Peter's statment is world shaking: to some it would have been blasphemous: to many others it would have been down-right silly. But to Jesus it was a moment of truth: through it all Peter had seen the light that God was shining on men.

If the passage eneded here we could congratulate Peter for his perception and sensitity and let it go at that. But the passage does not end here: Jesus went on to say some rather remarkable things to Peter. "Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jona - you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death (or the gates of Hell) shall not prevail against it." Roman Catholics have seen in this passage a Biblical justification for the Papacy. It is not my purpose this morning to refute that claim. Let it be said, however, that one must be willing to stretch the text a great deal to allow it to include a systematic, priestly hierarchy with an infallible Pope at the top - a theoretical successor to Simon Bar-Jona.

The real significance of the blessing placed upon Peter is not, in my mind, clear until we have read further. Peter had just made arather startling affirmation of faith. an affirmation that pleased Jesus. Peter had just been told that upon him would be built the Church of Jesus Christ. And in the very next breath Matthew tells us that it was Peter who rebuked Jesus for talking about his imminent death. Peter, the one who saw the true identity of Jesus so clearly, the one who had the courage to voice his belief, now failed to understand the implication of what he had just said. "You are the Christ the son of the living God" and now "God forbid Lord. This shall beve r happen to you." Jesus' response to Peter this time is a little different. "Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not on the side of God but of man." It's quite a demotion. Peter- one moment blessed, strong, a rock of faith, the next moment Satan, bungling insensitive, shallow, it is still upon Peter that Jesus will build his church. One minute a saint: the next a sinner, and yet the gates of hell will not prevail against the church of Jesus Christ.

So significant is this entire exchange that I must chose one motif over and against a number of others. Keeping the whole sequence in our minds then, let us think about this brief dialoge: Peter's affirmation: and Jesus estsblishing his church.

There is only one other passage in the godpels that even mentions the church. In fact, the Greek word rendered church, appears only three times in the four gospels, all three times in Matthew. It might be asked if Jesus really intended to establish a church at all.

Perhaps this text was a later addition inserted by churchmen interested in justifying their own existence. Certainly the Gospel accounts, and much of the writing of Paul, are based on the assumption that the end of the age is immminent. Clearly the first Christians did not expect to live out the normal course of their lives. Instead they anticipated the end of the age, the end of history, as God gathered his people up into the clouds of heaven. With the exception of this passage and a very few others, Jesus simply did not indicate the need nor desire for an instituition bearing his name.

But the end did not come, and the early Christians soon realized that they would not see the end of the age. With this realization came the awareness that it was their mission to carry on the work he had begun: and that wherever the Good News of Jesus was heard, those who believed it would band togather in a community of the faithful.

The church did not begin, however, when the early Christians decided among themselves to begin it. The church is not an instiution that sprang from the imagination of men who sat down as a committee to organize. Rather the church of Jesus Christ began with God at creation. The church of Jesus Christ was the natural and inevitable conclusion to the work God had been doing all along down through the centuries.

Let's think about that statment for a minute. Unlike other religions, Judaism did not present an abstract God. Unlike the philosophical theology of the 19th century the Bible never speaks of a God who is theoretical. Men have always thoguth about God. Since time began men have conjured up images of God, idols statues, pictures, books, poems. Men have always theorized about the nature of the creator. Along the way men have ended up creating their own Gods. The Judeo- Christian faith, however, is based on the exact opposite i.e., the assuption that alone we have no knowledge of God; that until God decides to reveal himself to man, man can know nothing of God. And so the O.T. does not deal with philosophic speculation: never once does it attempt to argue for the existence of God. The O.T. does not define God as the ground of being, or the first cause among all causes, or the source of human good. Rather the OTT speaks of the God who called Abraham: the God who brought Israel out of Egypt: the God who called a nation into being and revealed himself throught the history of thta nation

The God of the O.T. is npt an abstract, philosophic thesis. The God of the O.T. is one who acts, one who is known through his specific relationship to men. The Bible does not talk about God by himslef. Always there is a man, or a community of men. And so we see that the basis of our Christian Faith is a belief in a God who reveals himslef, a god who acts among men, a God who calls men together in a community of Faith..

We come nowt to the first century and the advent of Jesus Christ. Again we are talking, not about an abstract God, but a God who revealed himself, this time in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Again we are talking about belief, not in a set of propositions - but a faith that inevitabley draws men into a new community. The Church was inevitable. The church first existed when the disciples responded to Christ;s call. They became the church. Therefore, when we ask about the origin of the church, why and when and where, we are drivne to the conclusion that the church is God's creation, his instrument for continuing his work of reconciliation begun centuries ago in the nation of Israel. Jesus really didn't begin a new community: he renewed an eld community. That there would be a community was not a new idea. It was an old idea thatbegan with the call of Abraham. The church, the new Israel, like the old, would contain men who were both saints and sinners. Saints, in that God had called and they had responded: sinners, in that their efforts would often be inadequate and perhaps evil. ANd yet the church would never die: th the gates of hell would not prevail against it, because it would be Christ's church. And so the question of whether or not there ought to be a church is answerdd by the entire Biblical witness that men who believe must be a community: that men who have said I believe then begin to live that belief, and that living automatically makes them brothers with other believers.

And so, without hesitation, we affirm every Sunday morning, our Faith in the Holy Catholic Church. As we state our Faith, in the creed, we say: I believe in God: in Jesus Christ: in Forgiveness of sins, and in the Church, the communion of saints. This is the way is is, on page 12 of the Hymnbook at least. But in reality the contemporary church has come along way from its theological basis. In our day Christianity and the Christian Church have been divorced in the popular mind. Christianity is my personal belief in God:

whatever it may be. Christianity is my birthrite, like citizenship. I live in a Christia nation and I can prove it with the innocuous little prayers written by the school board which my children pray every morning. Anyone who would suggest that I am not a Christian must be a subversive. The Chucch? Oh yes, my wife belongs - and I see that the kids get there- Good moral training you know. I go every now and then: Christmas, Easter, whenever the kids are in a play. Nice people down there- and can they ever throw a dinne In the mind of this man I have created — and yet whom I talk to every day, the separation of Christianity and the Christian Church is complete.

At one time during the recent political campaign religion almost became an issue. One candidate ~~Senator Goldwater~~ told reporters that he does not go to church regularly because he can worship just as well riding up a canyon on his horse. For me there are no political implications here, and I'm glad it did not become a campaign issue. I use it only to illustrate what I believe is a very normal American statment about religion. It has simp never occurred to the man in the street that Christianity and the Christian Church are one and the same - according to the Bible. Take Christianity away from the church and you have a social club, a service club, or an idea forum. Take the church away from Christianity and you have no more than a list of theological propositions., for a man cannot believe in the God who was incarnate in Jesus Christ, a man cannot be a christia without becoming a participant in the community God himself has created. The man who thinks he can, is simply not believing in the ~~same~~ God of Abraham, the God of Israel, the God and father of Jesus Christ.

James Smart sums it up when he says: "The church is therefore the inevitable outcome of faith in Jesus Christ, and its ministry, which is its willingness to be the instrumentality through which Christ continues to speak and act and be what he is for all mankind, is an institution not of men but of God. To say "No" to this Church is to say "No" to Jesus Christ. And to say "No" to Jesus Christ is to say "No" to God."

To many critics, both within and without, the Church presents a pretty absurd pictur today. Divided doctrinally, liturgically, spending billions on itself while millions

starve, refusing to speak and act in a sick world, going off in a hundred different directions: - the church is not perfect. But it is the church; and it is through this institution that God has chosen to act today. Not for a minute would I say that I am satisfied with the church - am d yet npt for a minute can I say that the Christian faith means anything else. The Church needs to recapture its identity: it needs to redefine itself as Christianity in life: it needs to reclaim its authority, its divine ordination.

At this point, we who are inside need to distinguish between loyalty to the church, enthusiasm for it, or ewen love for it, and belief in it as an article of faith. If we questioned church members about their relationship to a certain church, wouldn't most of them say: ("they have good nursery facilities, we like the choir, we like the minister, all , our friends go there"/) Wouldn't some of them say: ("It's a good influende in the community, or we really get something out of it"?) How many people would say that they are in the church because they believe in the church as an indespensible ~~xtxm~~ expression of the Christian faith? People prefer to say that they belong to the church, rather than that they believe in the church. Belonging suggests a casual relationship that can be dissaolved. One belongs to clubs, organizations and societies. "Believing in" the church suggests an inner binding, a faith in the institution as such, a complete commitment to it and its mission.

It is my hope, that as we approach the climax of of our Building program, we will build upon the basis of our belief in the church - as God's instrument. Let us not make the fatal mistake of thinking too little of this church and the work that goes on here. For of all your commitments, of all your obligations, this is the only one that is ultimate: this is the only one ordained, created and activated by God himself. However small and insignificant we may seem, however many mistakes we have made and will make - we are the church - and the gates of hell will not prevail against us.

Amen